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ABSTRACT

Second Step, a research-based violence prevention program for kindergarten through middle school aged children, was implemented in several Jefferson County Public Schools. The objective of Second Step is to increase children's ability to identify with how others are feeling, take others' perspectives, and respond empathetically while decreasing their angry and impulsive behavior. The management-oriented evaluation approach was used in the evaluation of the 12 elementary schools in JCPS who are currently participating in the Second Step Program. Statistically significant differences were found in the pre- and post-test analysis at the district and the school level. The results of the study provide some encouraging evidence of a positive effect on the central measures. Several limitations of the study were noted including the fact that selection criteria may have resulted in an atypical set of schools. Although the results are encouraging, intervention may need to be accompanied by other interventions in early childhood and adolescence to further reduce aggressive behavior. (Contains 14 references.) (JDM)

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Early Interventions in High Poverty Elementary Schools: The Impact of a Mental Health Program on Social Skills and Conflict Resolution Learning

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SECOND STEP PROJECT (SS)

Introduction

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) is the 26th largest school district in the United States. The school district serves more than 96,000 students from preschool to grade 12. JCPS has a vision for long-term student achievement. The vision entitled "Beyond 2000" was designed to assure that every student will acquire the fundamental academic and life skills necessary for success in the classroom and workplace. JCPS vision commits the school system to educate each student to the highest academic standards.

In October 1999, Project SHIELD (Supporting Healthy Individuals and Environments for Life Development) received nearly $3,000,000 from a consortium of federal agencies (Department of Education, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Center for Mental Health Services) as part of a Safe Schools/Healthy Students Federal Initiative. The award will provide three years of funding (nearly $9,000,000) to Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS).

Project SHIELD aims to provide students and schools with enhanced infrastructure and comprehensive prevention and early intervention, through education, mental health, and social services that promote healthy childhood development and prevent violence, alcohol and other drug abuse. These services target the development of social skills and emotional resilience necessary for youth to avoid violent behavior and drug use, along with establishing safe, disciplined, and drug free areas within school environments.

Research studies have demonstrated that there is continuity in aggressive behavior over time: children who have aggressive behavior in the elementary school years are more likely to display antisocial and violent behaviors as adolescents and young adults (Farrington, 1991; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984; Tremblay, McCord, Boileau et al, 1992). In this regard, early intervention has been advocated as most appropriate to break this chain of events (Tremblay & Craig, 1995; Yoshikawa, 1994).

Second Step is part of the Community Mental Health component of project SHIELD. Second Step is a research-based violence prevention program for K-middle school aged children. Second Step is designed to prevent aggressive behavior by increasing prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior reflects competence in peer interactions and friendships and in interpersonal conflict resolution skills. According to Grossman and colleagues (1997), the Second Step violence prevention curriculum appears to lead to a moderate observed decrease in physically aggressive behavior and an increase in neutral and prosocial behavior in school.

As part of project SHIELD, Seven Counties Services is implementing Second Step in Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS). The objective of Second Step is to increase children's ability to identify what others are feeling, take others' perspectives, and respond emphatically with others. The program has also the objective of decreasing impulsive, aggressive, and angry behavior. Second Step has 28 lessons each school year. The focuses of the lessons are on precursor behaviors that are incompatible with violence such as (a) empathy, (b) impulse control, (c) problem solving, and (d) anger management. Lessons are developmentally appropriate in content and delivery with ample opportunity for students to model, practice, and reinforce their pro-social behavior.

The Management-Oriented Evaluation Approach

The management-oriented evaluation approach (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997) was used in the evaluation of the PMHP. According to Stufflebeam (1983; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 1985), the evaluation is a process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives. The Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) Evaluation has different objectives, methods, and relation to decision making in the change process depending on the type of evaluation emphasis.

> The management-oriented rationale is that the evaluative information is an essential part of good decision-making and that the evaluator can be most effective by serving administrators, policy makers, boards, practitioners, and others who need good evaluative information (Worthen et al., 1997, p. 97).

Campbell (1969) seminal article on reform as experiments is germane to this evaluation. Today, 30 years later, many ameliorative programs terminate with no interpretable evaluation. The good intentions of educational administrators are not enough. Establishing social indicators, data banks, and management information systems (MIS) is not enough. As Campbell (1969) argues, administrators are sometimes so committed in advance to the efficacy of the reform, that cannot afford a honest evaluation. Capitalizing on regression, grateful testimonials, and confounding selection and treatment are the major strategies to bias the analysis. Only experimentals and quasi-experimentals designs for research will help to address the threats to internal validity (Campbell & Stanley, 1966; Cook & Campbell, 1979; Winer, Brown, & Michels, 1991).

Method

Participants

Twelve elementary schools in JCPS are currently participating in the Second Step Program. Table 1 shows the name of the schools participating in the program.

Table 1

Elementary Schools Participating in Second Steps (N = 12)

Name
Atkinson
Breckenridge-Franklin
Cochran
Crums Lane
Engelhard
Frayser
Hazelwood
Jacob
Roosevelt-Perry
Rutherford
Semple
Shelby

In the District, a total of 179 students took both the pre- and the posttest. Seven Counties provided no student identification number. The evaluator conducted a matching procedure using grade, school location, last name, and first name to obtain a profile of the students participating in the program. Given the duplication occurring when not having a unique identification number (e.g., last name, first name), only a total of 75 students were matched and only for those students demographic information was obtained in JCPS Teradata system. Table 2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of these students. All students were on first grade of the participating elementary schools.

Table 2

Profile of Participating Students (N = 75)

Race	Gender	Lunch Status
50.7% Black	60.0% Female	84.0% Free
46.7% White	40.0% Male	5.3% Reduced
2.7% Other		10.7% Pay

Instrumentation

In general, quantitative measures will be based on already established data collection mechanism of the county under examination. Data will come from the program director and from the Management Information System (MIS) of the county. Then, the evaluator will place the information into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) through the creation of a data file.

The Evaluation Interview for Second Step was used to measure the students in the primary program of the school district under study. The purpose of the Evaluation Interview is to assess the degree of knowledge and/or skills a student has before and after the intervention. Photos are placed one at a time on a table or desk with the student sitting opposite of the interviewer. The procedure is standardized and includes (a) consistency, (b) reading the questions as written, (c) pacing, (d) probes, and (e) recording answers. The instrument has established validity and reliability. Raw scores are recorded in the instrument. This measure was used as the outcome criteria for establishing success of the program at the school level.

Data Analysis & Procedures

As mentioned previously, for the quantitative dimension of this evaluation study, a descriptive and comparative design will be used (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). All data was entered and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 10.0.

Findings

Statistically significant differences were found in the pre- and posttest analysis at the district and at the school level. Table 3 shows the pre-test and posttest measures and their statistically significant t-value at each of the participating schools.

A graphical representation captures the impact of the program at the district level when comparing the treatment and the comparison group and using the Evaluation Interview as the measurement tool (Figure 1).

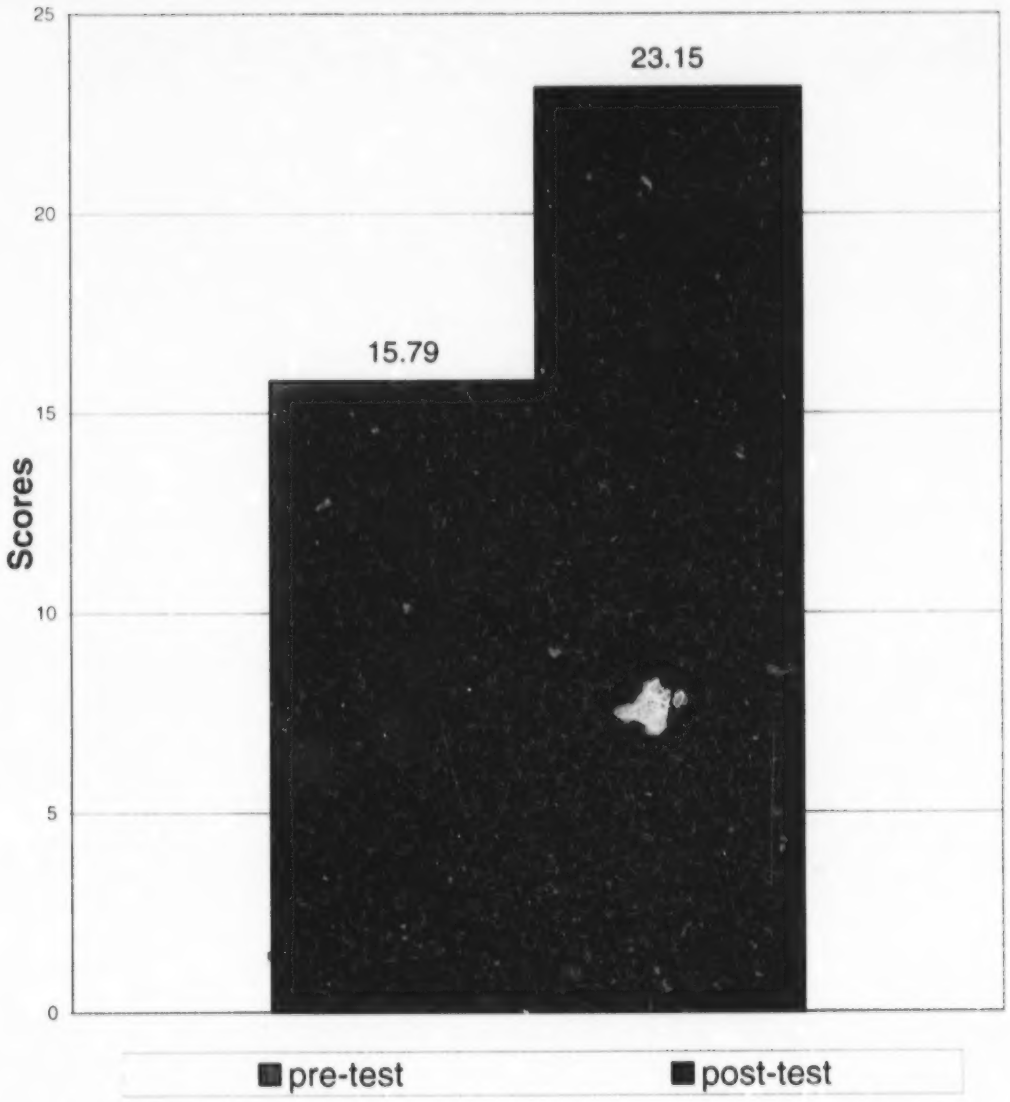
Table 3

Elementary Schools Participating in Second Step (N = 12)

Name	Mean Pretest Score	Mean Posttest Score	t-Ratio
Atkinson (n = 16)	16.88	26.00	9.22*
Cochran (n = 9)	20.44	25.44	1.63
Crums Lane (n = 20)	15.95	24.70	9.10*
Engelhard (n = 14)	13.79	22.21	7.47*
Frayser (n = 14)	17.86	19.50	1.75
Breckinridge-Franklin (n = 12)	15.25	25.83	5.36*
Hazelwood (n = 16)	15.13	22.06	6.76*
Jacob (n = 11)	15.36	26.55	7.71*
Roosevelt-Perry (n = 15)	13.80	24.67	12.78*
Rutherford (n = 28)	15.61	20.68	9.49*
Semple (n = 16)	15.19	22.13	5.82*
Shelby (n = 16)	16.50	23.13	4.76*
District (N = 179)	15.79	23.15	18.82*

$p < .001$

Figure 1
Second Step
Pre-Posttest Analysis (N = 179)



Discussion

Second Step is a research-based, universal program. This early detection and prevention program for primary grades is being implemented by JCPS through Seven Counties. The Evaluation Interview was used as a pre- and posttest measure for the participating students in the treatment and control schools.

The Evaluation Interview is used to assess the degree of knowledge and/or skills a student has before and after the intervention. The central measures were related to (a) empathy, (b) impulse control, (c) problem solving, and (d) anger management. These measures became outcome criteria for establishing success of the program at the district and at the school level.

As a District, the gains on the pretest/posttest measure were statistically significant at the .001 alpha level. Gains were also noted at most of the individual schools. The results of this study of Second Step, a widely used violence prevention curriculum, provide some encouraging evidence of a positive effect on the central measures.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had several potential limitations. First, selection criteria for participation may have resulted in an atypical set of schools, classrooms, and students. Second, since only the curriculum as a whole was evaluated, it is not possible to determine which component of it were responsible for the effects. Finally, though the results are encouraging, the Second Step intervention may need to be accompanied by other interventions in early childhood and adolescence to further reduce aggressive behavior.

To measure the effects of the program on non-cognitive and cognitive measures, it is recommended to use a treatment versus comparison group pre-posttest design at the student level in factors such as: (a) absences/attendance rate, (b) tardies, and (c) letter grades on core subject areas such as reading, mathematics, science, and social studies.

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